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# NEO-CONSERVATISM IN THE USA FROM LEO STRAUSS TO IRVING KRISTOL

*Giorgi Khuroshvili, MA student*

Grigol Robakidze University, Tbilisi, Georgia

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## Abstract :

The article deals with the issues and problems concerning neo-conservative ideology in the USA. Until now, discussions continue to run high about adversity and joy of this political ideology. In order to clarify neo-conservative ideology and its transformation, the author of the article discusses two most important figures – Leo Strauss and Irving Kristol who are considered to be the founders of neo-conservative ideology in practical politics as well as in the discourse of political philosophy.

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## I.

Neo-conservatism as an ideology became distinct or persuasive in the aftermath of the cultural unrest and university riots in 1960's America. The early neo-conservatives sought to change domestic American politics by using the ready-made moral foundations that religion provided without necessarily being religious themselves and mould that together with Platonist doctrine via the reading provided by Leo Strauss who is often cited as the ideological father of neo-conservatism. Strauss was an outstanding scholar of the history of political philosophy. He produced fifteen books and many essays on his subject. Despite Strauss's remoteness from practical politics, he was considered to be one of the most influential men in American politics.<sup>1</sup> One of the main reasons of such influence was his students or followers, number of conservative intellectuals, with a special interest in political philosophy and American constitutional history, who are called Straussians. The Straussians

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, S. B. Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism: The University of Chicago Press. 2006

are also the only group of "conservatives" ever to amount to anything in the academic world. They have reportedly been gradually, quietly infiltrating and taking over political science departments, making that discipline characteristically theirs. The Straussians are the most powerful, the most organised, and the best-funded scholars in the United States; however, at the same time they are considered to be an intellectual base for several administrations of the United States.

Strauss strongly believed that the United States was founded on classical and biblical grounds and that the crisis of modernity was caused by deserting those grounds. Accordingly, his scientific work was fully dedicated to the restoration of classical political philosophy and to its representation as a contemporary political doctrine. He is especially noted for seeking to revive the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns<sup>2</sup>. In a number of books Strauss calls for a return to and a renewal of ancient political philosophy, and in particular that of Plato. For Strauss the need to return to the Platonic and other ancient texts in order to recover the nature of political life arises from the particular character of modernity. Modernity originated in the transformation of political philosophy affected by Machiavelli. Strauss describes the change in political philosophy affected by Machiavelli in various ways: as a “lowering of horizons,” as a “new conception of nature,” and as a “replacement of human will for nature as the source of standards.”<sup>3</sup> In all of these characterizations, it is clear that for Strauss, modernity is founded upon the internalizing of the sources of morality within human subjectivity, and, as the necessary correlative of this, results in the abandoning of nature and total historicization of all moral and political standards. So, Strauss sees the need to turn to classical political philosophy as a whole to be integral to recovering an understanding of nature. He considers Socrates to be the founder of political philosophy; for him politics and philosophy were knit together by Socrates' death. The city (politics) collided with Socrates (philosophy). By his selflessness Socrates has brought moral judgments in politics and thus became the founder of political philosophy.

The philosophic works of Strauss intend to bring the moral judgments back in political discourse; therefore, he attempts to discover the best political regime in order to actualize it in modern philosophical-political discourse. In his book *What is Political Philosophy?* Strauss considers that the practical meaning of the notion of the best regime

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, S. B. *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*: The University of Chicago Press, 2006

<sup>3</sup> Strauss, L. *What Is Political Philosophy?*: The University of Chicago Press, Free Press, 1959.

appears most clearly when one considers the ambiguity of the term "good citizen."<sup>4</sup> Under the notion of "good citizen" he supposes the patriotic citizen, the man whose loyalty belongs first and last to his fatherland. However, he also notes that the meaning of the good citizen entirely depends upon the regime. Apart from good citizen good man does not have such relativity, as far as to say in his words "the meaning of good man is always and everywhere the same".<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, he concludes that "the good man is identical to good citizen only in one case - in case of the best regime".<sup>6</sup>

Hence, Strauss's desire to discover the best political regime is caused by the experience of the past and in particular by the death of Socrates, as it seems there was a conflict between the man and the city, so Socrates was condemned to death by the city of Athens. Despite "He was given an opportunity to escape from prison: he refused to avail himself of this opportunity. His refusal was not based on an appeal to a categorical imperative demanding passive obedience, without if's and but's."<sup>7</sup> Strauss considers Socrates choice to be the moral act, an act which brought moral judgments in politics. Socrates chose to die in Athens; he preferred to sacrifice his life in order to preserve philosophy in Athens. His choice was intended to be an example for all others, that the notion of good man and good citizen can be put together only in case of best regime, the regime which is based on the one hand on positivistic political thought and on the other hand on values or virtues.

Strauss's intention of bringing moral judgments back in modern political discourse was not as successful as he thought it to be; the neo-conservative lack of faith toward democratic values became obvious in their writings. Most of the neo-conservative intellectuals including his students and followers fought that only the military strength, and not the western values, was able to counter the totalitarian enemy. They faced the cruel reality that the humankind was naturally evil. Socialism failed; so, the solution was the pursuit of a non secular liberal democracy that addressed the crisis of relativism.<sup>8</sup> To paraphrase one of the most famous students of Strauss - Allan Bloom, American minds had become so open that they had become closed.<sup>9</sup> So the primer task of the neo-conservative intellectuals was to look for search the new directions of American politics. Otherwise,

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<sup>4</sup> Strauss, L. What Is Political Philosophy?: The University of Chicago Press, Free Press. 1959

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Murray, D. Neoconservatism: Why we need it. London: The Social Affairs Unit. 2005

<sup>9</sup> Bloom, A. The Closing of the American Mind. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1987

finding morality through secularist ideals would lead to moral bankruptcy, crime and underachievement<sup>10</sup>. Accordingly, in the true Platonic sense, the neo-conservatives realised what was best for America and felt it their duty to steer the misguided populace, and later the world via neo-conservative application in foreign policy, to their senses.

Today, liberals favor the idea that the nations of the world should turn their foreign policy over to international bodies like the United Nations or the European Union. On this point, the neo-conservatives as well as the classics would dissent. No one can be expected to understand the interests of a nation better than its own citizens and statesmen.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, the classics would have viewed multilateral organizations with suspicion. Strauss was one of the first who analyzed the imperfectness of liberal approach; he considered that political alliances can be justified even with nations who oppress their own people. One's own survival, not the well-being of peoples of other nations, is the standard. In order to defeat Hitler, America had to support Stalin. Hence, his approach was the following: even with the bad men it is permissible to fight against evil. But another implication of Strauss's approach is more controversial. It is the ruthless subordination of the good of other nations to one's own good. The foreign policy of the classics is essentially selfish, because the main purpose of all good politics is "self-improvement," the advantage of one's own political community, not the common good of other political communities. The foreign policy of Strauss and the classics seeks neither hegemony over other nations nor benevolence toward other nations, unless, accidentally, one or the other is a means to survival. Yet, this very selfishness leads to results that are quite moral, if morality is defined as cultivation of the good life for one's own people, while refraining from injuring others unless they attempt to injure you. In his book *What Is Political Philosophy?* Strauss addressed the grounds of that lesson in the principles of the classical political philosophy. For the classics, wrote Strauss, foreign policy is primarily concerned with "the survival and independence of one's political community."<sup>12</sup> For that reason, "the ultimate aim of foreign policy is not essentially controversial. Hence, the classical political philosophy is not guided by questions concerning the external relations of the political community. It is concerned primarily with the inner structure of the political community."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kristol, I. *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Chicago: Elephant. 1995

<sup>11</sup> *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, edited by Thomas L. Pangle; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989

<sup>12</sup> Strauss, L. *What Is Political Philosophy?*: The University of Chicago Press, Free Press. 1959

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The implementation of Strauss thoughts in practical politics and in particular in foreign policy was done by the influential neo-conservative intellectual, political commentator Irving Kristol who, as much as anyone, defined modern conservatism and helped revitalize the Republican Party, setting the stage for the Reagan presidency and years of conservative dominance. Kristol considered that America needs a practical, modern, secular conservatism that delivers results that benefit an ordinary voter. He offered a “revolutionary message” that a “self-disciplined people can create a political community in which an ordered liberty will promote both economic prosperity and the political participation.”<sup>14</sup> Viewed in this way, one can say that the historical task and political purpose of neo-conservatism would seem to be as follows: to convert the Republican Party and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills, into a new kind of conservative politics suitable to governing a modern democracy. It is beyond doubt that this new conservative politics is distinctly American. There is nothing like neo-conservatism in Europe, and most European conservatives are highly skeptical of its legitimacy. The fact that conservatism in the United States is so much healthier than in Europe, so much more politically effective, surely has something to do with the existence of neo-conservatism. But Europeans, who think it absurd to look to the United States for lessons in political innovation, resolutely refuse to consider this possibility. Kristol is basically admitting what critics of the neo-conservatives have been saying all along that the neo-conservatives real interest is in spreading an ideology, not in preserving and enhancing our historic political, social, and moral order; that neo-conservatism went into something of a slump after the demise of the U.S.S.R. because the U.S. lost its ideological rival and the main reason for international crusading.<sup>15</sup> The neo-conservatives campaign to export America’s ideology to the world is thereby revealed as a fraud. Their motive in promoting a global American crusade is not to expand America’s democratic ideology, since that is now officially defunct, but simply to expand America’s power, along with their own power as the chief theorists and architects of this adventure. Hence neo-conservative movement has altered its task, instead of bringing moral judgments in domestic politics it started to expand neo-conservative ideology all over the world. Thus, Strauss’s view that the purpose of foreign policy is or ought to be survival and independence, or self-preservation, and nothing else,<sup>16</sup> was buried in oblivion.

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<sup>14</sup> Kristol, I. *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Chicago: Elephant. 1995

<sup>15</sup> Kristol, I. *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Chicago: Elephant. 1995

<sup>16</sup> Strauss, L. *The City and Man*: The University Press of Virginia. 1964.

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